

April 16, 2024

Dear Judge Montgomery,

This June will make nine years since I joined the so-called Islamic State. The person who left was young, ignorant, and misguided. I've been changed by life experience: by the treachery I endured as a member of ISIS, by becoming a father of four, a husband, an amputee, a prisoner of war, a malnourished supplicant, by seeing the pain and anguish and gnashing of teeth that terrorism causes, the humiliation, the tears, the shame. I joined a death cult, and it was the biggest mistake of my life.

Some of the political and social views I held before knowing ISIS readily meshed with the group's beliefs. For example, I didn't believe in the concept of nation-states in the Islamic world. Nation-states and Nationalism divided Muslim communities against each other. The borders of these nations were the creation of colonizers. If there was one unified Islamic State, I believed, many problems would be solved. Wealth would be more evenly divided – the oil resources of the Arab Gulf countries would be sent, as *Zakat* (Islamically ordained charity) to Indonesia or Sudan.

I thought I was doing something right by joining ISIS. The group portrayed joining as every Muslim's individual obligation. The ISIS propaganda machine was adept at crafting a unified narrative by weaving 1,400 years of Islamic history into a simplistic story, the end chapter being ISIS the protagonist versus everyone else as the antagonist. That long history provided ISIS the ability to cherry-pick only the most extreme religious and political opinions from well known and respected Muslim historical figures. They used red herrings, straw man arguments, and many, many logical fallacies to convince me and people like me that their outlook was correct. I became a true believer. I disbelieved and avoided any opinion against ISIS. I didn't believe testimonials of people that were abused by ISIS until later, when I witnessed it firsthand. I simply didn't believe that ISIS was evil. I thought the media portrayed them unfairly. The horrific clips that I saw where people were beheaded were explained away. "Clearly, ISIS would only behead someone convicted of a grievous crime." "Beheading is probably less painful than the electric chair." "The gruesomeness of this video will prevent more bloodshed by halting ISIS' enemies from attacking. The self-deception and mental

gymnastics went on and on.

What appealed to me was defending civilians against Syrian President Assad's brutal chemical weapons and barrel bombs, redistributing vast oil wealth so that no one lived in poverty, and ruling with an Islamic justice free from the corruption and bribery that plagues most Muslim countries. That was the ISIS vision, and it was all a farce.

I saw the worst form of a Fascist police state, built to control every individual's thoughts and willing to kill to keep their people in line. I saw, in only five years, the lives of tens of thousands wasted. I met unrepentant war criminals who planted landmines and shot rockets at the very oppressed people we had come to "save." I saw slavery reborn, an ISIS group on social media was selling a developmentally disabled and incontinent Yezidi girl for \$6,000. The biggest lie of all – that ISIS had a grain of justice, was refuted again and again by what I witnessed every day, and made worse to me because I could compare it to the freedom I had as an American.

The brutality I saw against civilians further pushed me away from the group. I could talk for days about the horrors that I saw. I saw three blindfolded men dragged out in front of me by a group of masked men, while I was selling cakes in the village market in 2018. One man read from a piece of ripped cardboard their charges – armed robbery – and pronounced the verdict: Death. The other masked men pulled out their handguns and shot all three innocent men in the head. I intentionally call them innocent. The civilized world, unlike ISIS, believe a person is innocent or guilty only in a fair, just, and impartial court of law, after having their crime proven beyond a reasonable doubt – through evidence lawfully gained – after having the opportunity to defend themselves. That is true justice. That is what I believe in. In contrast, I witnessed in an ISIS prison, ISIS' own members being forced to admit to their crimes to an interrogator. Of course, if this is how they treat their own troops, how they treated others became more believable. There was no right to counsel. There was no freedom of speech. There was no right to assembly. In fact, ISIS had no written laws or codex at all, so an ISIS "judge" could cherry-pick 1,400+ years of Jurisprudence to find you guilty or innocent, based mainly on you're connections and influence.

Thankfully, there were many factors that led me to ideologically separate myself from their beliefs. Some of these factors I knew before I left, but re-studying them after coming

back to the US framed them in a new light. I was still in Syria when I read about the Jonestown massacre. It made me realized the malleability of human beliefs and convictions, even a rational person could “drink the kool-aid.” Studying the Chinese communist party's indoctrination after I came back affirmed that I was in a cult – a death cult, and a cult of personality. The tactics that China's Mao Zedong used, are the same used by all autocrats, from Saddam, to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to Pharaoh himself. Studying Nazi Germany in 2021 allowed me to understand how a nation of western, educated people, could believe in so false a Messiah, and so evil a message. I reread George Orwell's novels *Animal Farm* and *1984* as soon as I came back. I felt both books could have perfectly described what I had just experienced. The more I read, the better I saw my own misguidance. The more I read the more I knew my experience to be non-unique, an idea both comforting and disturbing.

You're Honor, I should have known better than that. I *knew* better than that. I used to carry around a pocket Constitution before I became an extremist. I was a libertarian. Extremism changed that, and gave me a perverted worldview. While in that mindset, I just didn't appreciate my rights or my privileged in being an American, until it was taken away from me over there. I wanted to speak out, but I couldn't because I feared being labeled a spy or a traitor and being put to death. I didn't care about the suppression of free speech until I myself wanted to speak out.

The humiliation I experienced in my time of need led me to see the world in a better way. The International Committee of the Red Cross saved me and many other ISIS members in that prison. They brought us bedding and hygiene products. They brought us food, when we where malnourished and starving. Doctors without Borders brought us medicine, when before people where dying of basic infections and ailments. Save the Children raised my two boys and gave them a Kurdish mom to replace their blood mother. They are currently taking care of thousands of UISIS orphans in Syria, and doing an excellent job at it. The NGOs were the true heroes. The staff of these organizations helped as their humanitarian duty. They know, had ISIS captured them, they would be beheaded as infidels.

I have been further humbled and shamed by the kindness of my former enemies. All three branches of the US government, in addition to the media, where instrumental in my children and I being saved. The Journalism that I had mistrusted, was the sole reason my family

knew I was alive. They reported my children were alive but missing, which prompted my parents to start searching for my boys. The Federal Complaint saved my life. A third of the people with me in the Syrian prison died, of asphyxiation, of torture, of starvation. That should be me by all rights. I would pray, every second of every day, to be brought back to America, even if it meant life imprisonment. I yearned for clean water. To not be tortured. To call my family. The indictment brought me back to America, made possible because of America's involvement in Syria, which I had previously opposed. Without American involvement, there would have been no logistics to bring me back.

To the State Department, I was a supplicant – I wanted their help to find the apples of my eyes, my two young, vulnerable, missing boys. I would call The State Department and former diplomat Peter Galbraith almost every week, annoying them with questions and imploring them for help. They succeeded: they found my two missing boys for me. For months, the US military braved ISIS arms and IEDs to transport the Diplomats from refugee camp to refugee camp to look for my sons. Peter, as a private citizen, even traveled to Syria to visit my boys. Had anything bad happened to anyone of them, it would have been my fault – they put themselves in danger to help me, after all.

The Department of Homeland Security issued my adopted son Abdullah a Humanitarian Parole visa, so he could enter the United States. They didn't have to – the Immigration and Naturalization Act gives them full discretion to accept or deny any application, and the migrant crisis gave them a legitimate excuse to delay because of the massive paperwork they deal with every day. Instead, they saved my boys, who had been through so much together, the further trauma of being separated.

Our local congresspeople were very forthcoming in responding to our requests for help. They were supportive of my parents trying to get back their grand kids. The House of Representatives' Homeland Security Oversight Committee opened up an investigation to see why my adopted son's paperwork was taking so long. To this day, I can't believe it – the highest levels of government were helping me, a former traitor, to bring my non-citizen son to the United States. I am so deeply blessed. Had I been just a Moroccan, I would still be there, probably dead, and my kids would still be missing.

As you can tell, your Honor, I owe a huge debt to so many people. To my supportive

parents I owe everything. Even though I had ruined their lives, they still talk to me every day. My parents will raise my son Abdullah as their grandchild. In some ways they love him more than their own blood grandson. Am I not the luckiest person in the world?

To all the US combat veterans I have met, I owe a huge debt of gratitude. Every last one of them has spoken only words of kindness to me, whether they were Marines or Army, whether they were Correctional Officers or inmates. I'll never forget what one of them, a veteran of Desert Shield said to me, with a tear in his eye, as I recounted the religious prosecution I witnessed under ISIS: "I joined so that you and people like you could have the religious freedoms they deserve." There was one man who especially stood out – David Branch, who said so many things that healed my heart, that extinguished my anger. I met him in Michigan in 2022. He shared so many similar experiences with me. He gave me the idea of serving and working with combat veterans to heal old wounds, and was gracious enough to invite me to meet his war buddies in the VA in Battle Creek, Michigan.

In the future, I will do everything that I can to prevent more people from falling victim to ISIS' propaganda. In that end, I have been invited by the FBI to do just that. I have also had the experience of sharing my story with two young men who had tried, and thankfully failed, to join ISIS. I met them in the Federal Transit Center in Oklahoma. I was the first ISIS member they met. After days of sharing my story, one of them told me "You've done more to convince me against joining ISIS than the experts I met." After knowing what I know, no rational person would support ISIS. I believe that is where my redemption will come from. It's the least I can do to prevent someone from making the same painful mistake I made.

I've done everything that I can do, while being incarcerated to show my true remorse, my disbelief in ISIS and terrorism, and my acceptance of responsibility for being with ISIS. I haven't hesitated, when given the chance, to work against terrorism. I still have a lot of work to do, and a big debt to pay, to every innocent victim of ISIS.